

SAA 2026 Seminar: Early Modern Eco-Memory

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Abstracts

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Affective Horticulture in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*

Early English horticultural manuals advise amateur gardeners on how and when to sow; the cultivation of vegetables, fruits trees, and flora; and where to position plants in relation to others. Beyond such practical concerns, these manuals are also attuned to the affective impact of botanical life, relating the “pleasure...delight...and jucundity of mind” a thriving and well-organized garden provides (Hill 4). In emphasizing the ways the body and mind respond to botanical abundance and growth, horticultural books, such as Thomas Hill's *The Gardener's Labyrinth* (1577) and Hugh Plat's *Floraes Paradise* (1608), suggest an occult sympathy between human and plant life; the solace and joy botanical life offers are not merely the result of human labor, but an expression of the deep occult bond between plants and humans.

In this paper, I consider the implications of human-botanical sympathies alongside Thomas Kyd's depiction of a family pleasure garden in *The Spanish Tragedy*. This *locus amoenus*—a space cultivated for pleasure and repose—transforms, as critics have demonstrated, to a site associated with Horatio's murder. I suggest that Isabella's and Hieronimo's affective orientation toward the garden plot reflects their former conception and memory of the space, as well as their understanding of the occult properties of plant life—the expectation that a strategically cultivated garden will bring about solace rather than sorrow. Specifically, I demonstrate how Isabella draws on both the language of sympathy *and* antipathy as she avenges her son's death by felling the garden's trees. The bereaved mother suggests these arboreal witnesses are sympathetically aligned with her body even as she curses them as antipathetic accomplices. In this scene of horticultural destruction and suicide, Kyd strategically ambiguates the logic of sympathy and antipathy, exposing not only early moderns' deep investment in human-botanical sympathies, but also the repercussions when reliable sympathetic bonds fail. If cross-species sympathetic bonds offer tragic protagonists solace, as I argue in the longer iteration of this piece, Kyd disrupts this convention of early modern tragedy to underscore Isabella's particular expression of maternal lament.

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“A dream and fruitless vision”: Early English Almanacs and Eco-Imagination in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Early modern English almanacs, though often miscalculated predictors of meteorology and seasonal illness, imagined the natural world as a place rife with tension –idyllic, agrarian abundance coincided alongside potential environmental catastrophe. That being said, as argued by Pauline Reid, print objects such as almanacs were becoming increasingly used as visual apparatuses of cognition and memory; human knowledge and memory changed from a purely mental space to a physical one in print. For early moderns, human memory was no longer a strictly cognitive science, but capable of an ephemeral, fragile transformation into print. If the printed page was an indication of physical human memory, I read the almanac as an ephemeral manifestation of early moderns’ impression of the natural world. The almanac, while often inaccurate, offers glimpses of an imagined natural world, one plagued by anxiety, fear, and cultural memory of catastrophic natural disasters. In studying these texts alongside two of Shakespeare’s most environmentally focused plays, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I showcase not only the powerful influence of these small cultural print objects in everyday life, but also how almanacs can upend our imagination and memory about the early modern ecological world. Does this natural world truly exist, if the almanac was simply a fleeting prediction from one year to the next? Ultimately, by close reading almanac woodcut illustrations, calendars, and prognostications alongside a comparative context in Shakespeare, I argue that almanacs influenced, imagined, and predicted a natural world that was as inconstant as it was fickle in the face of human memory.

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“Be They Never so Carefully Preserved”: Anne Clifford and Communal Historiography

Anne Clifford (1590-1676) worked tirelessly to reclaim her status and estates after she was disinherited by her father. This act of reclamation inspired numerous works of literature, from her diaries to her massive *Great Books of Record* detailing her family’s descent through English history. Literary scholarship on these works, although enlightening, has primarily focused on Clifford’s personal relationship to her culture and her past. She certainly views herself as an innovative and righteous upholder of her family’s status, referring to herself as “sole daughter and heir” almost exclusively in her various writings. But while this proud individuality is a major part of her literary works, her engagement with her past is also distinctly communal. Clifford, in her *Great Books of Record* and her autobiographical works, argues for a community-based historiography. More specifically, she argues that it is the community’s responsibility to actively preserve the past against the hazards of the present. Among her testaments to her own

inheritance, Clifford asserts that everyone from her own secretaries to her rural tenants are crucial parts of a larger inheritance of English history. Throughout her work, she returns to this community network as an essential resource for effectively preserving documents, local knowledge, and most importantly, historical landmarks. By attending to this overlooked philosophy pervading Clifford's work, we can better understand her innovative work in early modern historiography.

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The Limits of Eco-Memory in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* open with seventeen procreation sonnets urging the Young Man to marry, have children, and preserve his fleeting beauty through his descendants. The majority of these sonnets make this case using conceits of the natural world. In "Sonnet 1," the Young Man is "beauty's rose." In "Sonnet 3," he is urged to "[call] back the lovely April of [his mother's] prime." In "Sonnet 5," he is warned that "never-resting time leads summer on / to hideous winter." On the one hand, the procreation sonnets seem to suggest that there is no potential for eco-memory in the natural world; time marches on and nothing gold can stay. On the other hand, they suggest that participating in the natural, seasonal cycles is the only way to preserve beauty and memory. "Sonnet 5" ends, "But flow'rs distilled, though they with winter meet / Leese but their show, their substance still lives sweet." Flowers, and the Young Man's beautiful youth, cannot be preserved for long in their original form; if memory and beauty are to endure, transformation and cyclical change are required. My paper will analyze the potential and limitations of eco-memory in Shakespeare's procreation sonnets, considering the implications of the conceits used, the prevalence of those conceits, the role of the few first sonnets that are not nature-focused, and what impact this opening has on the rest of the sequence.

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"Still in mine eye the memory of my losse": Lost Items, Memory, and the Thames in Rowley's *A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed*

In William Rowley's *A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed*, the titular Widow of Cornhill is cursed with good fortune and thus has never been "vexed." In an emblematic episode, she loses her wedding ring while crossing the Thames, but it miraculously reappears in the salmon she is serving for dinner. Describing this event, the Widow laments, "I pris'd it dear; the dearer cause it kept / Still in mine eye the memory of my losse; / Yet I grieved the losse, and did joy withal / That I had found a grief" (1.2.125-27). She is saddened by the loss of the

ring, a memento honoring her dead husband; yet, ironically, she also feels joy that she has finally become the victim of misfortune. As she predicts, however, the Thames literally reestablishes her auspicious fate by restoring the ring. Reading the Widow's story alongside other early modern accounts of lost goods in the Thames, my paper for our seminar will examine the intersections of lost objects, the role of memory, and the urban environment.

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“Kent Unconquered” and Ecological Memory

This paper begins with the traditional story that the county of Kent was never conquered by William of Normandy. As a result, Kent remained an unincorporated place, reputed as the starting point of several rebellions and noted for a people embodied by their “greenness.” I think through Thomas Wyatt's Kent estate—Allington Castle—and the surrounding country land as mythically resistant to authoritarian influence. I think examine how the Wyatt home and important landscapes of Kentish rebellion—particularly Maidstone and Blackheath—are reprocessed through Wyatt's son and his role in the Anti-Spanish and pro-Jane Grey rebellion. The Webster and Dekker play about the rebellion, *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, originates in Kent, and stretches through the landscape made famous by the Peasant's Revolt (1381) and Jack Cade's Rebellion (1450). The wildness of revolt becomes aligned with locality and landscape and implicates the nature of “home grown” resistance and the idea of Englishness. Here, I interrogate the space of Kent as important paradoxically for English nationalism through the perseverance of ecological resilience.

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Drowned in Memory: Ophelia, Ecology, and the Reformation of Grief

This essay reads Ophelia's death in *Hamlet* as a scene of ecological containment, where gendered grief is absorbed into the natural world in the absence of ritual, kinship, and communal mourning. Reported only through Gertrude's lyrical narration, Ophelia's drowning is framed not as a violent rupture but as pastoral stillness: a body borne up by water, adorned with flowers, and quietly drawn under. This calm aesthetic, however, conceals a deeper disturbance. Ophelia's death is unwitnessed, unritualized, and ultimately ungrieved, leaving the landscape to perform the work that social and religious structures refuse. Rather than functioning as passive scenery, the willow, brook, and flowers operate as mnemonic agents, transforming the environment into an alternative archive of loss. Nature absorbs Ophelia's body and memory, preserving her not through burial or speech but through ecological inscription. The water that carries her becomes

both womb and tomb, offering a fleeting gesture of care before enacting slow erasure. In this way, Ophelia's disappearance is not simply symbolic but materially staged through the play's environmental imagery. Thus, I situate Ophelia within post-Reformation anxieties about suicide and burial; Ophelia is remembered aesthetically, not ritually. Her death is translated into image, ornament, and landscape, while her grief remains structurally illegible. Reading Ophelia ecologically reveals how *Hamlet* encodes gendered disappearance into the natural world, making water and landscape the final custodians of a memory that exceeds language, ceremony, and the archive.

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“These happy Walks and Shades”: Ecological vs. Architectural Modes of Preservation in the English Country House Poem

This paper explores the differences between Eve's and Adam's reaction to the news of their impending exile from Eden in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. As affective responses to the loss of what is effectively both their biological habitat and their family home, the divergent paths charted by Adam and Eve in their respective laments map onto *Paradise Lost*'s broader division of the genders represented by these two figures, in which Eve is more closely associated with Nature, Adam with a humanized, paternalistic God. At the same time, I argue, these responses find both parallel and precedent in the literary tradition of the English country house poem. Using Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" and Aemilia Lanyer's "The Description of Cookham" as representative examples of two divergent types of country house poem, I trace the division between Adam and Eve's responses to what I feel can productively be described as a distinction between the 'ecological' and 'architectural' approach to memory within this genre. Ultimately, I conclude that the fact that Cookham's trees, fruits, and flowers are themselves affective participants in the speaker's memory, rather than spatial markers of that memory, means that they cannot be converted into monuments in the fashion imagined by Adam. Instead, what we see in "The Description of Cookham" is a view of nature's memorializing function that is more in keeping with what I refer to as Eve's 'ecological' perspective than Adam's 'architectural' one, as both women conceive of preservation in terms of memories invested in living, changing bodies rather than set in stone.